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**Towards a new understanding of identity: discourses of belonging in
Goethe's Italienische Reise and Heine's Italian Reisebilder**

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Bauer, Lukas, "Towards a new understanding of identity: discourses of belonging in Goethe's Italienische Reise and Heine's Italian Reisebilder" (2014). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 1365.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/1365>

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Abstract

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) account of his travels in Italy, *Italienische Reise* (1816, 1817, 1829), transformed the image of the South in the German literary imagination of the early nineteenth century. Goethe represented Italy's Arcadian landscape and classical heritage as the source of the German cultural tradition and as essential to Germans' understanding of their own history. Because of its association with Goethe, the journey to Italy was used as a vehicle by a later generation of writers to position themselves in relation to him and also to distance themselves from his influence and challenge his authority. Amongst these writers was Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), who, in his *Italian Reisebilder* (1829, 1830, 1831) arguably subverts the Goethean experience of Italy most overtly. Goethe's *Italienische Reise* is Heine's point of departure. He establishes a counter-discourse to Goethe's, through which he proposes a new understanding of belonging within his contemporary Europe that is based on humanist solidarity, not ethnic difference.

Keywords

italienische, reisebilder, goethe, italian, belonging, discourses, identity, understanding, towards, heine, reise

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Bauer, L. (2014). Towards a new understanding of identity: discourses of belonging in Goethe's *Italienische Reise* and Heine's *Italian Reisebilder*. In A. Corkhill and A. Lewis (Eds.), *Intercultural Encounters in German Studies* (pp. 107-119). St. Ingbert, Germany: Rohrig Universitätsverlag.

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY: DISCOURSES OF BELONGING IN GOETHE'S *ITALIENISCHE REISE* AND HEINE'S ITALIAN *REISEBILDER*

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) account of his travels in Italy, *Italienische Reise* (1816, 1817, 1829), transformed the image of the South in the German literary imagination of the early nineteenth century. Goethe represented Italy's Arcadian landscape and classical heritage as the source of the German cultural tradition and as essential to Germans' understanding of their own history. Because of its association with Goethe, the journey to Italy was used as a vehicle by a later generation of writers to position themselves in relation to him and also to distance themselves from his influence and challenge his authority. Amongst these writers was Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), who, in his Italian *Reisebilder* (1829, 1830, 1831) arguably subverts the Goethean experience of Italy most overtly. Goethe's *Italienische Reise* is Heine's point of departure. He establishes a counter-discourse to Goethe's, through which he proposes a new understanding of belonging within his contemporary Europe that is based on humanist solidarity, not ethnic difference.

Despite the more than forty years separating Goethe's and Heine's actual journeys to Italy, the publication of their respective travel accounts is in close proximity to each other and they are contemporaneous texts. While Goethe travelled to Italy in 1786, it was not until thirty years later that he published a revised version of his diary and correspondence in three parts, in 1816, 1817 and 1829, intended as the second instalment of his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1808-31). The public reception of Goethe's journey to Italy therefore came much later than the actual journey, occurring in the period leading up to Heine's journey in 1828 and the publication of his satirical account of his experiences in Italy: *Reise von München nach Genua* (1829), *Die Bäder von Lucca* (1830) and *Die Stadt von Lucca* (1831). Goethe's and Heine's respective representations of Italy are,

moreover, both personal reactions to the same cultural and political climate. As Thomas O. Beebee contends, “the publication of *Italienische Reise* [is] a deliberate act of nostalgia, of subtle resistance to the ‘New European order’” (Beebee, 39) that was designed by the Congress of Vienna, and “to German nationalism that rose in response to Napoleon’s invasion and the dissolving of the Holy Roman Empire” (Beebee, 39). Heine similarly counters nationalist ideology, yet unlike Goethe, he directly targets Prince Klemens von Metternich’s oppressive system of governance. While Goethe’s eyes are turned to an Arcadian past, in which he anchors his identity, Heine’s gaze is fixed instead on a utopian future. He signals his difference to the tradition that Goethe bequeathed to the German mainstream; a position that testifies to his Jewish origins. Countering Goethe’s discourse, Heine overcomes that difference by reconceptualizing what it means to belong to a broader European community.

In *Italienische Reise* Goethe constructs a narrative of ideal origins for Germans. He represents Italy – Rome in particular – as the source of the Western and specifically German cultural tradition. His account conforms in many ways to the conventions of the grand tour, in which Italy was typically imagined as the centre of Western culture, as Dennis Porter points out: “[T]he grand tour may stand as a paradigm of travel taken to the centre of a self-confident cultural tradition for the purposes of self-cultivation and reaffirmation of a common civilised heritage” (19). Goethe, however, as Joseph Luzzi argues, “went perhaps further than any of his contemporaries in establishing the ancient Greco-Roman cultural heritage as the common artistic and scientific ground of the modern European” (66). While Luzzi contends that Goethe established Italy as an “imaginary homeland” (52) for northern Europeans generally, both Gretchen L. Hachmeister and Richard Block argue that Goethe originated a specifically German myth of Italy (Block, 15; Hachmeister, 143).

Goethe’s experiences in Italy were significant not only for his personal development, but were to have repercussions for German society at large:

Die Begierde, dieses Land zu sehen, war überreif: da sie befriedigt ist, werden mir Freunde und Vaterland erst wieder recht aus dem Grunde lieb, und die Rückkehr wünschenswert, ja um desto wünschenswerther, da ich mit Sicherheit empfinde, daß ich so viele Schätze nicht zu eignem Besitz und Privatgebrauch mitbringe, sondern daß sie mir und Andern durchs ganze Leben zur Leitung und Förderniß dienen sollen (FA, 15, 134).

Goethe's pedagogical concerns encompass German culture as a whole. The treasures with which he will return to Weimar through his encounter with antiquity will transform German society and will guide and aid him and others throughout their whole life. Goethe envisages a renewal of German culture in the image of classical civilization, a concept that he further develops through the motif of rebirth: "Die Wiedergeburt, die mich von innen heraus umarbeitet, wirkt immer fort. Ich dachte wohl hier was Rechts zu lernen; daß ich aber so weit in die Schule zurück gehen, daß ich so viel verlernen, ja durchaus umlernen müßte, dachte ich nicht" (FA, 15, 160]. Goethe describes the process through which he becomes reborn, in order to purify himself, and finds his way back to origins; a process that is central to the bond he desires to create between modern German society and ancient Greco-Roman civilization. Thus Goethe legitimizes the German claim to Italy's heritage, and *Italienische Reise* documents not the experiences of a foreign culture, but rather a homecoming, and can be read as a "myth of return" (Cardinal, 27).

By the time Heine undertook the journey, the German image of Italy was closely bound to Goethe's experiences (Hachmeister, 2). Through his example, later German travellers following in his footsteps were imagined as reaffirming the link he had established between German and Italian culture. The journey to Italy, consequently, assumes the form of a German ritual of identity and belonging.

From Heine's perspective, however, the idealized image of Italy that Goethe promoted ignored a more pressing reality, and he challenges Goethe and the German cultural establishment by offering an alternative experience. In so doing, Heine has primarily a political agenda. He targets the hard-line politics of the Restoration and exposes

the suffering and oppression that resulted from that regime. Yet in addition to his critique of contemporary politics, he also reflects on wider social and cultural changes that were occurring throughout Europe during this period. These changes are expressed for Heine in a new mode of travel – modern mass tourism. He recognized that this was altering the way culture was experienced and perceived and had a particular effect on the way local communities identified with their own traditions.

Within this unstable environment Heine expresses a feeling of homelessness, an experience that is exacerbated by his Jewishness. The heightened significance of Italy in the German literary imagination further marginalized the Jewish population, since only the mainstream German tradition was regarded as having descended from Greco-Roman civilization. The Hebraic tradition could make no such claim (Cheyette/Valman, 8). Heine's experience of homelessness is emphasized through his self-representation as the narrator of the *Reisebilder* who moves uneasily through the shifting and unstable topography of Restoration Europe (Duroche, 150). He is unable to identify with any of the environments he encounters – whether in Germany or Italy – or with the traditions that constitute an important part of the relationship between both cultures. The concepts of departure and arrival are devalued; the diametric poles of *Heimat* and *Fremde*, between which the traveller vacillates, become less defined for the Jew abroad (Presner, 522). Goethe's journey to Italy is impelled by his desire to arrive in Rome, the idealized source of his tradition. Heine cannot make this claim, and his narrator is not driven to arrive anywhere, nor does he have a stable centre to which he can return. As Leonard L. Duroche contends, Heine's work "is marked by a profound sense that the forms of perception were changing, that political space, cultural space, and personal space were being altered by the conditions of the time" (Duroche, 148). The extant socio-political and cultural environment "undermined [Heine's] ability to dwell [...] and made it difficult for him, despite his longings, to achieve satisfactory identification with and orientation to anything other than utopian spaces" (Duroche, 148).

Since a unified Germany did not exist in any political sense until 1871, “Germany had to be invented via literature to exist at all” (Chase, 62).

In the remainder of this essay, I will examine how Heine participates in writing the German nation and deconstructs Goethe’s discourse of German cultural belonging. In so doing, Heine reconstructs a broader sense of community within Europe that does not seek its origins and legitimacy in the past but within the socio-political environment of contemporary Europe. Thus my investigation presents a study of an imaginary intercultural encounter between Germany and Italy on the one hand, and between German and Jewishness on the other.

Heine’s subversion of German imaginings of Italy and his challenge to the German literary establishment is evident in the following passage in *Die Bäder von Lucca*:

Es gibt nichts Langweiligeres auf dieser Erde, als die Lektüre einer italienischen Reisebeschreibung □ außer etwa das Schreiben derselben □ und nur dadurch kann der Verfasser sie einigermaßen erträglich machen, daß er von Italien selbst so wenig als möglich darin redet. Trotzdem, daß ich diesen Kunstkniff vollauf anwende, kann ich dir, lieber Leser, in den nächsten Kapiteln nicht viel Unterhaltung versprechen. Wenn du dich bei dem ennuyanten Zeug, das darin vorkommen wird, langweilst, so tröste dich mit mir, der all dieses Zeug sogar schreiben mußte. Ich rate dir, überschlage dann und wann einige Seiten, dann kömmst du mit dem Buche schneller zu Ende □ ach, ich wollt, ich könnt es ebenso machen! (HSW, 7/I, 113)

Heine’s disparaging account of travel writing on Italy, in which he firstly devalues the importance of Italy and secondly ridicules the excess of literature already written about it, begs the question: why then is he writing a travelogue of his own? It is a question that Heine himself appears to be asking his reader. The journey to Italy, he suggests, is a rite of passage for any aspiring writer and intellectual, a journey that he is impelled to make in order to be recognized as having a legitimate voice. Heine achieves the rhetorical feat of ostensibly participating in a tradition intended to sanction him as a writer and yet undermines and subverts that tradition in the process, thus demonstrating that it is in fact meaningless.

The centrality of Goethe in Heine's representation of Italy is evident in his frequent play with Goethean imagery. Heine is aware of the inevitable comparison that his reader will make between his travel account and *Italienische Reise*, and so as not to risk being seen as an inferior imitation he signals his difference and formally announces his opposition to his predecessor. Heine invites his reader to make a comparison between both works and positions his depiction of Italy in direct contrast to Goethe's own:

Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?

Kennst du das Lied? Ganz Italien ist darin geschildert, aber mit den seufzenden Farben der Sehnsucht. In der "Italienischen Reise" hat es Goethe etwas ausführlicher besungen, und wo er malt, hat er das Original immer vor Augen, und man kann sich auf die Treue der Umrisse und der Farbengebung ganz verlassen. Ich finde es daher bequem, hier ein für allemal auf Goethes "Italienische Reise" hinzudeuten, um so mehr, da er, bis Verona, dieselbe Tour, durch Tirol, gemacht hat (*HSW*, 7/I, 61).

Heine parodies Goethe's evocation of Italy in Mignon's song, perhaps the most iconic expression of German longing for the South. Heine draws a distinction between the imagined landscape of the poem and the purported reality that *Italienische Reise* describes. Heine advises his reader to refer to Goethe for an accurate account of Italy, revealing that a mimetic account of his experiences is not the former's intent. While Heine appears to give credibility to Goethe's aim of describing things as they really are, he in fact upholds the irrelevancy of that ambition (cf. Hachmeister, 148f.). Yet, at the same time, Heine gives himself the task of describing the reality of Restoration Italy by diverging from Goethe's trail and privileging the human over Goethe's aesthetic and scientific investigations. Heine censures Goethe's conceit of being a poet of nature: "Goethe hält [der Natur] den Spiegel vor, oder besser gesagt, er ist selbst der Spiegel der Natur. Die Natur wollte wissen, wie sie aussieht, und sie erschuf Goethe" (*HSW*, 7/I, 61). For Goethe, the traveller must learn to see objectively, a principle that Heine undermines by challenging the presupposition behind that

claim, throwing into doubt the universality of Goethe's approach towards travel, *Bildung* and Italy.

Typically, Heine replaces idyllic portrayals of Italy's classical ruins and exotic landscape with depictions of a grimmer reality. Heine's other Italy does not have the timeless dreamlike quality of Goethe's Arcadia, but instead is firmly situated in his present. Heine contrasts the wealth of Italy's past with its current poverty. The powerful myth of the South threatens to overwhelm the naïve traveller; Heine, however, sees through the illusion: "Es war jetzt nicht mehr die Zaubermacht der ersten Überraschung [...]. Und bei solcher Betrachtung entdeckt man viel, viel Trübes, den Reichtum der Vergangenheit, die Armut der Gegenwart und den zurückgebliebenen Stolz" (*HSW*, 7/I, 45). The misery of Italians is compounded by the oppressive Austrian rule of northern Italy. Heine describes the Italian *opera buffa* – one of the few occasions on which he shows any interest in Italian culture, significantly contemporary culture – as the only platform from which Italians, through the disguise of music, can vent their frustration at their servitude and voice their desire for autonomy:

Dem armen geknechteten Italien ist ja das Sprechen verboten, und es darf nur durch Musik die Gefühle seines Herzens kundgeben. All sein Groll gegen fremde Herrschaft, seine Begeisterung für die Freiheit, sein Wahnsinn über das Gefühl der Ohnmacht, seine Wehmut bei der Erinnerung an vergangene Herrlichkeit, dabei sein leises Hoffen, sein Lauschen, sein Lechzen nach Hülfe (*HSW*, 7/I, 49).

Heine's agenda in exposing the Restoration's oppressive rule is augmented by his indictment of modern tourism, which he recognizes as a new mode of travel emerging during that period (Buzard, 18) and which, like politics, was stifling Italian identity. For Heine, tourism was an expression of the politically indifferent and insular culture of the middle classes, exacerbating Metternich's cruel regime and suppressing the identity of local communities. Tourism was both a product of the times and an instrument in perpetuating its conservative and repressive ideology. Since tourism privileged history over politics, pleasure over social conscience, it was in the interests of the ruling aristocracy because it redirected the populace's attention away from

present political issues toward the safety of the past. Tourism depends on things remaining the same, and depreciates the need for progress and emancipation (Anglade, 431).

The impact of mass tourism renders an authentic experience of Italy beyond Heine's reach. Italy can no longer function as the locus of German origins in which the northern traveller can anchor his identity. Heine's censure of this new mode of travel particularly targets the British, who epitomize the advanced industrialized societies of northern Europe:

Beschuldige mich nicht der Anglomanie, lieber Leser, wenn ich in diesem Buche sehr häufig von Engländern spreche; sie sind jetzt in Italien zu zahlreich, um sie übersehen zu können, sie durchziehen dieses Land in ganzen Schwärmen, lagern in allen Wirtshäusern, laufen überall umher, um alles zu sehen, und man kann sich keinen italienischen Zitronenbaum mehr denken ohne eine Engländerin, die darin riecht, und keine Galerie ohne ein Schock Engländer, die, mit ihrem Guide in der Hand, darin umherrennen und nachsehen, ob noch alles vorhanden, was in dem Buche als merkwürdig erwähnt ist. Wenn man jenes blonde, rotbäckige Volk mit seinem blanken Kutschen, bunten Lakaïen, wiehernden Rennpferden, grünverschleierten Kammerjungfern und sonstig kostbaren Geschirren, neugierig und geputzt, über die Alpen ziehen und Italien durchwandern sieht, glaubt man eine elegante Völkerwanderung zu sehen (*HSW*, 7/I, 64).

Heine's tourists evoke images of a plague of locusts that transforms the Italian landscape beyond recognition. Their disturbing presence is accentuated by his use of the collective noun 'Schock,' which equates their arrival to an explosion. They are interested only in clichés and iconic images of the South, as opposed to actually observing the Italians themselves. Heine's tourists need to reassure themselves that everything is in its place as stated in the travel guides, through which observation Heine points out that the tourism industry is based on things remaining the same and resists social progress.

Heine's negative appraisal of tourism extends to its impact on local communities. He observes that through the market mechanisms of the tourism industry, traditional societies learn the value of their culture as a saleable commodity. As a result of allowing their local customs and

traditions to become wares in a transcultural market – a phenomenon that would be frequently documented by later anthropologists – communities forfeit their intimacy with their cultural practices and consequently can no longer identify with them in the same way (Greenwood, 131).

In various passages throughout his *Reisebilder*, Heine gives a moving account of community, with both admiration and a sense of being personally excluded (cf. Duroche, 153). In the section *Die Nordsee* (1826), on the Island of Norderney, he envies the “gemeinschaftliche Unmittelbarkeit” (HSW 6, 141) of the local people. In comparison, “[wir] leben im Grunde geistig einsam; [...] wir sind überall beengt, überall fremd und überall in der Fremde” (HSW, 6, 141f.). Heine stresses the isolation and alienation that accompanies modernity – “[die] Zerrissenheit der Denkweise unserer Zeit” (HSW, 6, 143) – where individuals can no longer identify with a group whose shared purpose and concerns lend a structure and meaning to life and create a sense of belonging. The concept of *Zerrissenheit* is a thematic concern throughout Heine’s *Reisebilder* and describes “the contradictory and divided nature of contemporary consciousness” (Phelan, 92). It is central to the condition of Heine’s narrator, who is unable to identify with any community or landscape that constitutes the feeling of being at home.

Yet even the secluded inhabitants of Norderney are not safe from the dangers of the modern world and the guests of the thriving seaside resort are portrayed as a corruptive influence that threatens the local people’s way of life and “Sinneseinheit” so admired by Heine:

Auch diese stehn an der Grenze einer solchen neuen Zeit, und ihre alte Sinneseinheit und Einfalt wird gestört durch das Gedeihen des hiesigen Seebades, indem sie dessen Gästen täglich etwas Neues ablauschen, was sie nicht mit ihrer altherkömmlichen Lebensweise zu vereinen wissen (HSW, 6, 143).

These changes to the islanders’ way of life can be understood in relation to Clifford Geertz’s concept of culture as a fabric or system of meanings through which communities organize their lives and perceive reality (Geertz, 145). Changes to that system, brought on in

this example by tourism, can result in the collapse of that meaning. Cultural change and its potential impact on the identity of local communities is explored further by Heine in his essay “Reise von München nach Genua” (1828), where he condemns the commercialization of Tyrolean culture that he witnessed whilst in London:

Als ich vorigen Sommer in den glänzenden Konzertsälen der Londoner fashionablen Welt diese Tiroler Sänger, gekleidet in ihre heimatliche Volkstracht, das Schaugerüst betreten sah und von da herab jene Lieder hörte, die in den Tiroler Alpen so naiv und fromm gejodelt werden und uns auch ins norddeutsche Herz so lieblich hinabklingen – da verzerrte sich alles in meiner Seele zu bitterem Unmut, das gefällige Lächeln vornehmer Lippen stach mich wie Schlangen, es war mir, als sähe ich die Keuschheit des deutschen Wortes aufs roheste beleidigt und die süßesten Mysterien des deutschen Gemütlebens vor fremdem Pöbel profaniert. Ich habe nicht mitklatschen können bei dieser schamlosen Verschacherung des Verschämtesten, und ein Schweizer, der gleichföhlend mit mir den Saal verließ, bemerkte ganz richtig: ‘Wir Schwyzer geben auch viel fürs Geld, unsere besten Käse und unser bestes Blut, aber das Alphorn können wir in der Fremde kaum blasen hören, viel weniger es selbst blasen für Geld’ (*HSW*, 7/I, 35).

Heine makes a stark contrast between the high culture of the fashionable world of London and the local traditions of the Tyroleans. He leaves his reader in no doubt as to his disgust at this shameless bartering away of intimate cultural practices. Although ironic in his hyperbolic praise of the naïveté and piety of Tyrolean traditions – satirizing the Romantic attraction to folkloric traditions – Heine expresses genuine respect for local culture and regret and pain at its commodification. His affectionate portrayal of Tyrolean traditions contrasts with his bitter and satirical attitude towards elitist notions of art and culture upheld by the aristocracy and the intelligentsia. The fetishization of local culture and flavour Heine regards as exploitative and patronizing. Situated within the wider context of his political polemics, this ‘top-down’ perception of culture is a further example of the repression characterizing the period.

Apart from Tyroleans themselves, the narrator also has much at stake in this besmirching of their traditions and suggests that he too identifies with their culture and songs, which “uns auch ins norddeutsche Herz so lieblich hinabklingen” (*HWS*, 7/I, 35). Through his use of the adjective *deutsch* – “die Keuschheit des deutschen Wortes”; “die süßesten Mysterien des deutschen Gemütlebens” (*HWS*, 7/I 35f) – he claims Tyrolean traditions as a part of his own cultural inheritance and, as such, he is personally affected by them being corrupted.

Heine is unable to dwell comfortably in the present, whether in Germany or Italy, as a result of the volatile political climate and the changing way that culture was experienced and perceived. He orients himself instead towards a utopian future and calls for a new understanding of what it means to belong to the contemporary European community that he bases not on ethnic difference but on humanist principles of solidarity and equality.

Heine recognizes that the age in which he lived was witnessing profound transformations that were reshaping Europe politically and culturally. In pitting himself against the *ancien régime*, Heine also counters nationalist ideology by offering an alternative vision of a unified Europe:

[T]äglich verschwinden mehr und mehr die törichte Nationalvorurteile, alle schroffen Besonderheiten gehen unter in der Allgemeinheit der europäischen Zivilisation, es gibt jetzt in Europa keine Nationen mehr, sondern nur Parteien, und es ist ein wundersamer Anblick, wie diese trotz der mannigfaltigsten Farben sich sehr gut erkennen und trotz der vielen Sprachverschiedenheiten sich sehr gut verstehen (*HSW*, 7/I, 69).

The restructuring of Europe gives rise to a unique opportunity for reform that Heine expresses in his frequently cited demand for emancipation: “Was ist aber diese große Aufgabe unserer Zeit? Es ist die Emanzipation” (*HSW*, 7/I, 69). Heine calls on everyone to participate in “den Befreiungskrieg der Menschheit” (*HSW*, 7/I, 70), which he imagines as being a unifying force that will bring people together from across cultural and political borders.

Heine envisages a European community that transcends national boundaries and in which all its members share the same rights: “[W]enn wir einst alle, als gleiche Gäste, das große Versöhnungsmahl halten und guter Dinge sind” (*HSW*, 7/I, 70). Heine creates a space in which he feels at home; admittedly its realization may still be some time away:

Es wird freilich noch einige Zeit dauern, bis dieses Fest gefeiert werden kann, bis die Emanzipation durchgesetzt sein wird; aber sie wird doch endlich kommen, diese Zeit, wir werden, versöhnt und allgleich, um denselben Tisch sitzen; wie sind dann vereinigt und kämpfen vereinigt gegen andere Weltübel, vielleicht am Ende gar gegen den Tod – dessen ernstes Gleichheitssystem uns wenigstens nicht so sehr beleidigt wie die lachende Ungleichheitslehre des Aristokratismus (*HSW*, 7/I, 70).

In conclusion, identity was in transition and required reformulation within the political and cultural upheavals that were occurring across Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century. Within this climate, Goethe and Heine offer differing approaches to the question of what constitutes a German and what a unified Germany should look like. Both writers, however, share a common dislike of nationalism. Similar to Heine, Goethe sees world citizenship as a desirable alternative to the nation state (cf. Beebee, 30). In *Italienische Reise*, Goethe expresses his vision of a *Kulturnation* that he envisages will manifest itself in the link between modern German society and ancient Greco-Roman culture. While Goethe anchors the German tradition in a mythologized past, Heine’s eyes are turned to the future. The modern European, Heine contends, needed to rethink what it meant to belong, which he suggests should be based on a common aspiration to equality and freedom and articulates an early vision of a unified Europe. This intercultural encounter between Germany and Italy, and the transhistorical cross-cultural engagement of a German-Jewish writer with his German forebear, both reveal a discursive struggle between these writers in their articulation of their identity. Goethe presents a dominant discourse of belonging within Europe through his representation of Italy as the source of his own cultural tradition.

Heine, by contrast, writes from the margins of European culture, and through his travels presents a counter-discourse that overcomes his Jewish otherness, while also challenging mainstream ethnocentric depictions of identity.

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